

8 February 1984

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1

Starting Over

Giving New Identities To Federal Witnesses Draws Increasing Fire

Despite Some Success, Critics
Say Lax Supervision Lets
Many Go Back to Crime

Strains of a New Beginning

By STANLEY PENN

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

X X X X X X X

While conceding the need to restrict knowledge of a protected witness's whereabouts, some local prosecutors strongly urge that the Justice Department tighten supervision of the offenders it places in their communities. Ted Wilson, the chief of the organized-crime unit of the Harris County, Texas, district attorney's office, says those responsible for protected witnesses "need to know what the witness is doing. Somebody must be on top of this."

The Justice Department's U.S. Marshals Service has the task of relocating witnesses, providing them with new identities and helping them find jobs. But it isn't responsible for keeping track of their whereabouts.

Indeed, it wasn't until 1978 that the government required federal supervision of criminals entering the program as federal probationers. In 1981 it extended such supervision to federal parolees. State parolees and probationers in the program still aren't federally supervised.

The Justice Department stresses that it recently has tightened screening of applicants to the program. Thus, in fiscal 1983, only 294 witnesses were accepted, a sharp drop from the roughly 450 people who entered annually during the mid-1970s. Applicants now also receive psychological testing to weed out those who are violent.

The stress associated with assuming a new identity may explain why some witnesses lapse back into crime after going into hiding. "I wouldn't advise clients to go into it," says Houston defense attorney Roy Beene of the witness program. "You are taking a guy off the street, sending him 1,000 miles away where he never lived, nobody knows him, where he has a funny accent.

He's now John Doe, has his family with him and has to find a job. It's not easy."

Until they find work—up to about a year—protected witnesses receive a monthly living allowance ranging from \$1,000 for a single person to \$2,800 for a family. (More than 7,000 family members have been relocated along with witnesses since the program's inception.) The stipend ceases if a witness refuses to take a job.

In trying to place witnesses, many of whom have limited job skills, the marshals service makes contact with a roster of about 150 corporations. "We want to make sure that the company we contact is not a target of an organized-crime investigation or associated with organized crime," says Howard Safir, assistant director of the marshals service. A prospective employer knows that the witness has committed a crime, but isn't told his true identity.

X X X X X X X

The Justice Department says that it now assists creditors by threatening to reveal the whereabouts of a witness who fails to meet his obligations, provided the witness's safety isn't jeopardized as a result.

Janet Schlachter of Washington, D.C., says she was left penniless when her husband, Douglas, vanished into the witness-protection program in late 1981. "I couldn't pay the debts he left behind," she says. "I couldn't pay the utility bills. We went for 10 days without gas and hot water."

Particularly galling, Mrs. Schlachter says, was the living allowance that the government furnished to Mr. Schlachter and the woman with whom he has been living. "But for me and my children—nothing," Mrs. Schlachter says bitterly. "My children haven't seen a dentist in four years."

Mr. Schlachter was associated with the notorious Edwin P. Wilson, who has been convicted three times in federal court for crimes involving his dealings with Libyans. Mr. Schlachter, after pleading guilty to weapons violations, drew a seven-year sentence in a federal court in Washington, D.C., last year. He served less than six months, the result of his cooperating with prosecutors in the investigation of Mr. Wilson and others.

According to E. Lawrence Barcella, a U.S. prosecutor involved in the case, Mr. Schlachter broke up with his wife and went to work in Africa prior to entering the witness program. The Justice Department takes credit for inducing Mr. Schlachter to return to the U.S. and to work out a property settlement with his wife. (Mrs. Schlachter says she has yet to receive any money from the settlement.) Mr. Schlachter, the prosecutor adds, no longer receives federal subsistence.